



The BSA and the Emergence of a 'Sociology of Food': A Personal View^[1]

by Anne Murcott
University of Nottingham

Sociological Research Online, 16 (3) 14
<<http://www.socresonline.org.uk/16/3/14.html>>
10.5153/sro.2344

Received: 4 Apr 2011 Accepted: 20 Jun 2011 Published: 31 Aug 2011

Introduction

1.1 A nameable 'sociology of food' in the UK is about half the age of the British Sociological Association (BSA). The BSA Food Study Group held its inaugural meeting in 1992 at the Association's Annual Conference, University of Kent. Somewhere around 1989, I had made enquiries of the BSA office about setting up a new Study Group, confident that there was the qualifying number of interested members engaged in sociological work on aspects of food and eating. Commitments at the time meant I was dreadfully slow doing anything until with great tact and delicacy, Teresa Keil and Alan Beardsworth got in touch to see whether I would mind if they took over.

1.2 Before that time, one date is (personally) significant. This was the Annual BSA Conference, on 'Gender and Society' held at Manchester University in April 1982. Two papers were paired in a joint session, chaired by Ronnie Frankenberg. One was by Marion Kerr and Nickie Charles (Kerr and Charles 1986) and the other was one of mine (Murcott 1983a). Charles and Kerr's paper was based on their study of women, food and family in a northern English city, mine on my study of (largely women's) conceptions of food and eating in some South Wales households. Before the conference, neither they nor I knew of the other's project. We sat listening to one another's papers with a very peculiar feeling of hearing, as it were, our own data being reported by someone else, so similar were our initial findings and interpretations.

1.3 What follows fills in a little of the backdrop to this glimpse of BSA history and then brings it up to date. The purpose is to make some undeniably incomplete contribution to creating a record of one corner of the BSA's work, reserving critique of developments in the field for another occasion (Murcott 2011). It is presented from a personal viewpoint, drawing on publicly available documents as well as materials accumulated in my own files. It begins chronologically, recording the growth of the BSA's Food Study Group (FSG) alongside wider developments in the sociological, and more broadly social scientific, investigation of food in the UK. A second section is devoted to attempting to characterise the scope and intellectual orientation of the FSG in particular, and the field in general. It ends by reflecting briefly on just one of various consequences for future work in shaping the field thus far.

1.4 Running throughout is the unoriginal observation that the agenda for sociological work on food often appears either to be geared to public health and nutrition agendas, or aligned with other extra-sociological interests on the consumption rather than production side. Of course, funding sources and opportunities, coincidence, organisational arrangements never mind the way social problems get named, and more, lie behind the directions in which sub-fields develop. This is no exception.

Quick chronology

2.1 Among the contributions to the inaugural FSG meeting in 1992 was a paper by Stephen Mennell presenting an approach that was of a piece with his *All Manners of Food* (Mennell 1985). His book is one of the early significant landmarks in the field, not least in its major theoretical contribution that applies Norbert Elias's 'process sociology' to the development of 'culinary cultures'. This work continues to stand alone, in that, though occasionally argued against in empirical terms (e.g. Warde 1997) its theoretical lead has not been followed. By contrast, Beardsworth and Keil's (1997) broad attitude to and specification of the sociology of food and society is recognisable across much subsequent work, as is that of Charles and Kerr's^[fn2] (1986a, 1986b, 1988) as well as my own (e.g. parts of Murcott 1983b).

2.2 So the field had started to open up the decade in the 1980s. Beardsworth and Keil's decision to study vegetarianism was strategic as mine had been a little earlier^[fn3] (Beardsworth and Keil 1992, 1993). They sought those who had, they believed, explicitly reflected on the taken-for-granted nature of everyday eating as a means of grasping empirically what might otherwise be hard to apprehend sociologically. In this respect, work initiated in the 1980s still had a pioneering air. Yet by the end of the decade, enough had been produced for William Outhwaite to commission Mennell to compile a Trend Report on food and eating for *Current Sociology*^[fn4]. Spotting a market (despite the readership for which it had been written) the journal's publishers, Sage, issued it simultaneously as a textbook (Mennell, Murcott and van Otterloo 1992) – in the same year that the FSG got off the ground.

2.3 While the 1980s saw new work emerging, sociology was none the less a relative latecomer to the social scientific study of food. Social anthropologists had long attended to the matter, and their work – especially that of Mary Douglas^[fn5] – inspired some of the sociology (Murcott 1988). Social historians' attention also antedated that of sociologists. Contrasting styles and different groups of scholars are evident^[fn6]. Much longer established was the social history associated with the work of the nutritionist John Yudkin^[fn7] who took the view that '[I]n the study of human nutrition, the social sciences are as important as the natural sciences' (Yudkin and McKenzie 1964: 9) championing the close involvement in nutrition (some would say service to) of a range of social sciences. Yudkin's thinking was the inspiration behind the creation of a multi-disciplinary research seminar containing nutritionists, food scientists as well as historian. And it is notable that *The Making of the Modern British Diet*, one of the several edited volumes of papers presented at the seminar, included chapters on *both* history and nutrition (Oddy and Miller 1976).

2.4 Among the seminar members was the historian Derek Oddy^[fn8], who, when serving on a Board of the Economic & Social Research Council (ESRC) around 1983, proposed funding social scientific research on food. A feasibility study was duly commissioned. That study report, 'The Social Science of Eating, Nutrition and Health'^[fn9] was submitted to ESRC in July 1985 (Dalley 1985). But by then, the momentum had apparently evaporated^[fn10] and nothing came of the proposal. Only later, in 1988-9, was the topic resurrected, coinciding with the appointment at ESRC of a civil servant who had previously worked at the Health Education Council^[fn11]. New consultations were commissioned^[fn12], the procedures for creating a multi-disciplinary^[fn13] 'Research Initiative' successfully negotiated and "The Nation's Diet: the social science of food choice" funded. Running from 1992-1998, sociology was well represented: four of its sixteen projects were exclusively sociological, and three more included sociological collaborations with economics and with nutrition (Murcott 1998)^[fn14].

2.5 Although the first (abortive) suggestion had come from a historian who worked closely with nutritionists, and the second (successful) one had involved a civil servant who had been committed to health (and nutrition) education, it is notable that neither consultant reports were narrowly focussed on social scientific aspects of nutrition/health. Despite her report's title, Dalley divided it into four sections, only one of which dealt with health – the others were 'the determinants of eating', 'eating patterns' and 'the determinants of change' (Dalley 1985). The title of my own contribution simply adopted that of the working group's^[fn15] proposed research initiative on 'Health and Nutrition', but the coverage extended outside it to discuss considerations from 'production to consumption' (Murcott 1990). The sociology projects^[fn16] in the Programme similarly stepped aside from 'taking' nutrition and health problems in order directly to seek solutions but 'made' sociological questions via which to address them. So for instance, Murphy *et al.* did not simply take the nutrition policy question and ask 'why do women fail to comply with advice to breast feed their infants' but made it into a sociological enquiry about the social circumstances under which women made decisions about infant feeding (Murphy *et al.* 1998).

2.6 In some part made possible by the Nation's Diet funding, by the first decade of the new millennium the volume of work in the field had increased considerably (both in the UK and elsewhere). At the same time, the activities of the FSG itself had been consolidated, so that by 2008 its first major conference, attended by over 100 delegates, was held in London, followed in 2010 by a second (also held in London) that was even better attended. Both were entitled 'Food, Society and Public Health', and both aimed to 'explore the interface between food, society and public health through a sociological lens' and both appear to confirm that the FSG is now well established.

BSA Food Study Group: scope and intellectual orientation

3.1 The three decades of the UK 'sociology of food' just portrayed is selective. Work on the topic that tends to come under headings such as the sociology of risk (e.g. reactions to food scares such as 'salmonella in eggs' or BSE), science and technology studies (e.g. public understandings and apprehensions of GM foods) or the sociology of consumption (Alan Warde's major contribution immediately stands out here) has been left to one side, and for good reason. For there commonly appears to be relatively little overlap in either attendance/ membership of the FSG – there are other forums – or in the literature, whether conceptually or simply in terms of cross-referencing. I return to point out later similarly reduced overlap between bodies of work/ groups of researchers. For now, I take a closer look at the intellectual orientation evident in recent FSG activities in general, and the work included in the 2008 and 2010 conferences in particular.

3.2 In the light not just of the chronology presented above, but specifically of the title and aim of both conferences, it could be expected that nutrition and public health policy and practice would be reflected in the scope and intellectual orientation of work presented at each of them. Correspondingly, it could be expected that practitioners in those fields might be attracted to attend: like the BSA itself, the FSG is open to interested parties from other disciplines as well as from beyond the academy^[fn17]. In one simple respect, this expectation is not borne out.

Table 1. National origin and discipline of papers and posters presented at the 'Food Society and Public Health Conference' 2008, BSA Sociology of Food Study Group

	UK & Ireland		Non-UK & Ireland		Total
	Papers*	Posters	Papers	Posters	
Sociology & other social sciences**	14	8	6	2	30
Public health practice***	5	6	1	2	14
Total	19	14	7	4	44

*Excludes 3 that fall into neither disciplinary category

** Includes: agri-food studies, cultural studies, STS, social anthropology, social geography, social history

*** Includes: food policy practice, health promotion, marketing, nutrition, nutritional epidemiology

Source: Conference Programme

Table 2. National origin and discipline of papers and posters presented at the 'Food Society and Public Health Conference' 2010, BSA Sociology of Food Study Group

	UK & Ireland		Non-UK & Ireland		Total
	Papers	Posters	Papers	Posters	
Sociology & other social sciences**	23	9	14	2	48
Public health practice***	12	3	4	0	19
Total	35	12	18	2	67

** Includes: agri-food studies, cultural studies, STS, social anthropology, social geography, social history

*** Includes: food policy practice, health promotion, marketing, nutrition, nutritional epidemiology

Source: Conference Programme

3.3 Approximately three quarters of the papers and posters presented at both conferences are classifiable as sociology (see Tables 1 and 2). Admittedly, a wide definition of sociology was adopted covering several cognate disciplines and allocation to this category was generous. Based only on published abstracts, criteria for inclusion vary: from the research methods used (ethnography, discourse analysis), authors' departmental affiliation, the literature referenced, to evaluations of policy and practice. By contrast, reports of interventions devoted to changing behaviour to improve compliance with dietary guidelines, studies identifying barriers to policy implementation, work devising means of improving urban food access or presentations of efforts to persuade people to 'cook from scratch' were classified as public health and policy practice. So using this crude check, it would seem that the sociology 'outweighed' the public health and policy practice. Instead, there are two further things to be said about this swift inspection of the orientation of work presented at both FSG conferences.

3.4 The first is that there is a noticeable continuity with the range of topics and intellectual attitude of work in the 1980s. Beardsworth and Keil's (1997) broad attitude to and specification of the field culminated in their later textbook. They emphasised food consumption rather than production. The latter is represented by the treatment in two chapters of 'the food system' dealing in particular with pre-industrial modes of subsistence. By contrast, most of the book deals with eating: its social organisation, particularly in the domestic sphere, but also eating outside the home; food and health (including weight reduction and anxieties) and food avoidances and preferences – a strong theme of the anthropology of food (Beardsworth and Keil 1997). Such topics recurred in the conferences' papers and posters. Certainly more contemporary topics are evident in addition: obesity and body image, 'ethical' food consumption, sustainability and alternative food movements, nutrigenomics, and slow food. But the orientation to the food remains on the consumption rather than production side.

3.5 Furthermore, a closer inspection of the selection of themes and approach suggests that the typical researcher's 'gaze' is aligned with that of thoughtful, well informed members of the public. These are the people (a little like you and me?) who are: interested in 'eating local'; concerned about the consequences of contemporary eating habits for disadvantaged members of the population; ambivalent about weight loss and fitness; worried about the rise in obesity but also associated stigma, sympathetic to fat studies; conscious of everyone's health and well being; suitable eating despite the pace of everyday life; aware of food across the life course but in particular for children... and so on. They are the people whose research looks to have started from their own lives in the kitchen, the university common room, being ill now and then, as parents, of a left-leaning political persuasion and sometimes as activists and members of pressure groups. They are not the people who are familiar with the inside of a food science laboratory, have

marketing experience or know how to run a profitable business. Nor, even, are they the people who study the organisation of work, the professions, labour relations, or whose research topics include everyday farm life or the role of seed merchants or the catering industry.

3.6 Noticeable by its absence is attention to the supply side. As Geoff Tansey of the Food Ethics Council asked at the end of the 2010 conference, 'where are the focus groups with supermarket bosses?' Setting aside the unlikely image of Terry Leahy^[fn18] picking up his High Street voucher as a thank you for taking part in a group, conference delegates could not have missed his point. If food production figured at all, it was on a small scale: renewed interest in growing your own; waiting lists for allotments. If retailing figured it was farmers' markets. And both engage only a tiny minority of any industrialised nation's population.

And the consequence is...?

4.1 That food production figured in this distinctive fashion reflects, of course, an academic division of labour. There is a major divide between what in Australasia is known as agri-food research and in the US agro-food research, and the sociology of food described above. Agri-food research is mirrored in the UK by social scientists conducting research on environment and society, rural policy or the rural economy – Philip Lowe at Newcastle University (Director of RELU), Jules Pretty at Essex University and Michael Winter at Exeter University, to mention invidiously just three. Researchers in these fields publish in journals such as *Sociologia Ruralis* and *Rural Sociology*, whereas sociologists of food publish in *Food and Foodways*, *Food Culture & Society* or *Appetite*. Researchers in the US have reduced this divide somewhat in that the Association for the Study of Food & Society (ASFS)^[fn19] – an approximate counterpart to and founded seven years before the FSG – has, since 1992, held its annual meetings jointly with Agriculture & Human Values group.^[fn20]

4.2 Academic divisions of labour are commonplace, boundaries between disciplines shift and blur over time, watching old ones atrophy and seeing them superseded by new ones can be interesting enough. When it comes to the social scientific study of something which, for once, can without exaggeration be described as vital, the consequences of division may be more than an intriguing spectacle. The academic division of labour roughly corresponds to a bisection of the food chain – typically if inaccurately described in singular. It thus leaves conceptually undisturbed a depiction of it as linear and uni-directional – from production to consumption, from farm to fork. Yet to sociologists and their colleagues in cognate social sciences in each of agri-food and the geography, anthropology and history of food, this depiction is unduly simple. They can readily see that there are intricate patterns of social (political, economic) relationships amongst actors at various points doubling back along that imaginary chain, arcing across from one end to the other. In real social life, it is probably less a chain more a multi-dimensional set of intricate networks^[fn21].

4.3 For some time, food and food security has risen up the UK policy agenda. Following the publication of 'Food Matters' (Cabinet Office 2008) cross departmental coordination has led to the 'main public funders of food-related research... working together through the Global Food Security programme' (Global Food Security 2011). Detailing arrangements for the collaboration, the Government Office for Science published a 'Cross-Government Food Research and Innovation Strategy'. It includes a diagram summarising the 'Food Responsibilities across Government, Devolved Administrations and Research Councils' (GO Science 2010: 17). Across the top of the diagram is a large arrow, running left to right, along which is listed running in the same direction the following: Natural Environment Research, Agri-Food Research, Production, Manufacture, Distribution, Consumer, Health, Food related Disease. The text picks out the social sciences area of responsibility: 'Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) research also spans the food chain, with a focus on the social sciences and economics from understanding farm management and modelling world food supplies to gaining insights into food choice.' (2010: 19). The diagram, however, shows ESRC's responsibilities split into two: under 'agri-food research' and then mostly under 'distribution' 'consumer' 'health'. Were a rapprochement between the sociology of food and agri-food to be effected (as called for by Murcott and Campbell 2004) then the issues might be more realistically conceptualised and the possibilities for innovative cross-disciplinary work created – as well as the possibility of new funding opportunities opening up to members of the BSA Sociology of Food Study Group.¹ I should like to thank the Editors for advice on this submission. I also thank Wendy Wills, the previous convenor of BSA Sociology of Food Study Group for the invitation to present a 'Food Open Stream' plenary address at the 60th anniversary BSA Annual Conference in London April 2011 – work on which prompted writing this piece. For comments, criticism and all kinds of support especially in emergencies during the few weeks leading up to the Conference, I am most grateful to: Hugh Campbell, David Evans, Andrew George, Louise Hide, Peter Jackson, David McVicar, Elizabeth Murphy, Roger Murphy, Lindy Sharpe, Virginia Olesen; fellow members of the SOAS Food Scholars' Workshop; STS colleagues at the University of Nottingham. I apologise if I have been forgetful and borrowed anyone's ideas without attribution – it is inadvertent and out of gratitude. Deficiencies are my own.

² Their study was funded by the then Health Education Council.

³ Elements of my own work had also been strategic. Planning in 1978-9 what would be a feasibility study of conceptions of food and eating funded by the SSRC (now ESRC) I focussed on pregnancy and new motherhood for two reasons. I was aware that though there was at the time relatively little concern about the nutritional status of the UK population at large (Murcott 1994, 1997) these stages of the life course were held to entail nutritional at-risk groups and opportunities for public nutrition education during ante-natal care. So aiming to improve my chances of securing funding, I couched my grant application in terms of these policy concerns. This decision was reinforced by uncertainty as to the etiquette of investigating adult's eating but knowing that discussion of feeding, digestion etc was routine in pregnancy and early infancy sought to use these circumstances as an entry into topics of my enquiry.

⁴ Who invited Anneke van Otterloo (whose PhD at the University of Amsterdam he had just examined) and I to join him.

⁵ Posthumously, she remains listed as an honorary member of the International Commission on the

⁶ That of the 'Oxford Symposium on Food'

<<http://www.oxfordsymposium.org.uk/>> dates from the late 1970s has focussed on cookery and, for some, is antiquarian and Whiggish, in contrast to the critique of Whig history of The 'Society for the Social History of Medicine' whose second conference on the social history of nutrition was held in Glasgow in 1993 (Smith 1997).

⁷ Responsible for setting up the first degrees in nutrition in Britain in 1953.

⁸ Later Emeritus Professor in Economic and Social History, University of Westminster and committee member of The International Commission for Research into European Food History (ICREFH) which was founded by Hans Jurgen Teutberg in 1989.

⁹ Based on literature reviews and consultations with researchers, including myself.

¹⁰ When already employed elsewhere, Gillian Dalley's covering letter to me is dated 6 November 1985. She wrote: 'I am sending you a copy of the report as submitted in July to the ESRC. So far I've had no response from them – although eventually I expect they will be in touch.'

¹¹ An energetic champion of the Programme, he is also responsible for its title.

¹² Including three reviews of literature, in economics, psychology and policy. And this time instead of being interviewed, I was commissioned to implement the ESRC requirements to consult widely in the preparation of a 'Stage II bid for a Research Initiative'. The remit was: '(1) to identify topical concerns and relevant policy areas (2) to identify where work proposed at Stage I would complement or duplicate existing or planned research (3) to ensure suitable representation of the diversity of interests. Begun in February, the majority of consultations with 35 government departments, industrial concerns from production to consumption, professional associations, academic departments and specialists were conducted in March 1990' (Murcott 1990:1).

¹³ ESRC required such initiatives (renamed programmes by the early 1990s) to include projects across several social science disciplines, and collaboration with other sciences welcomed.

¹⁴ Though I was Director of the Programme, I was barred from funding decisions by ESRC regulation in force at the time.

¹⁵ The working group consisted of members of the then ESRC Human Behaviour and Development Group.

¹⁶ Unlike the psychology projects which were more closely tied to the solution of public health problems, one in particular (Lowe *et al.* 1988).

¹⁷ The FSG aims are: '[T]o encourage the sociological analysis, both theoretical and empirical, of all aspects of food production and consumption and to encourage interdisciplinary links among researchers in this area.' The strongest cross-disciplinary associations are with public health and nutrition. Links with psychology, economics are not obvious, and with history are intermittent even though research on food continues in all three disciplines. And, parallel to the observations noted in the final section, there seems to be no overlap at all with the Rural Economy and Land Use (RELU) Programme.

¹⁸ Ex CEO of Tesco supermarket.

¹⁹ <<http://food-culture.org>>

²⁰ <<http://www.afhvs.org/>> and see also the Agri-food Research Network, the Australasian counterpart <<http://www.afrn.org.au/>>

²¹ I am indebted to Peter Jackson for a recent conversation on this point.

References

BEARDSWORTH, A and Keil, T (1992) The vegetarian option: varieties, conversion, motives and careers *The Sociological Review* vol. 40 no.2 pp.253-93

BEARDSWORTH, A and Keil, T (1993) Contemporary vegetarianism in the UK: challenge and incorporation *Appetite* vol. 20 pp. 220-34

BEARDSWORTH, A and Keil, T (1997) *Sociology on the Menu: an invitation to the study of food and society*. London: Routledge

CABINET OFFICE (2008) 'Food Matters: Towards a Strategy for the 21st Century' Cabinet Office Strategy Unit <<http://www.foodsecurity.ac.uk/assets/pdfs/cabinet-office-food-matters.pdf>> accessed 5 September 2008.

CHARLES, N and Kerr, M (1986a) Eating properly, the family and state benefit *Sociology* vol. 20 no. 3 pp.412-9 [doi:[dx.doi.org/10.1177/0038038586020003008](https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038586020003008)]

>CHARLES, N and Kerr, M (1986b) Issues of responsibility and control in the feeding of families in The

Politics of Health Education S. Rodmell and A. Watt (eds) London: Routledge

>CHARLES, N and Kerr, M (1988) *Women Food and Families* Manchester: Manchester University Press.

DALLEY, G (1985) *The Social Science of Eating, Nutrition and Health* report submitted to the ESRC July (mimeo).

GLOBAL FOOD SECURITY (2011) 'Global Food Security Strategic Plan 2011-2016'
<<http://www.foodsecurity.ac.uk/assets/pdfs/gfs-strategic-plan.pdf>> accessed 1 March 2011.

GO SCIENCE 2010 UK Cross-government Food Research and Innovation Strategy
<<http://www.bis.gov.uk/assets/bispartners/goscience/docs/c/cross-government-food-research-strategy>>
first accessed 3 November 2010; checked 30 March 2011.

KERR, M and Charles, N (1986) Servers and providers: the distribution of food within the family
Sociological Review vol. 34 no. 1 pp.

MENNELL, S (1985) *All Manners of Food*. Oxford: Blackwell.

MENNELL, S Murcott, A and van Otterloo, A (1992) *The Sociology of Food: Diet, Eating and Culture*
London: Sage.

MURCOTT, A (1998) '*The Nation's Diet*': the social science of food choice. Harlow, Essex: Longman.

MURCOTT, Anne (1983) "'It's a pleasure to cook for him...': food, mealtimes and gender in some South Wales households' in Eva Gamarnikow, David Morgan, June Purvis and Daphne Taylorson.

MURCOTT, Anne (ed.) (1983b) *The Sociology of Food and Eating* Aldershot: Gower.

MURCOTT, A (1988) 1988 'Sociological and social anthropological approaches to food and eating' *World Review of Nutrition and Dietetics* 55 1-40.

MURCOTT, A (1990) Proposed Research Initiative on Health and Nutrition Consultant's Report to ESRC April (mimeo).

MURCOTT, A (1994) Food and nutrition in post-war Britain' in Jim Obelkevich and Peter Caterall (eds)
Understanding Post-War British Society. London:

Routledge.

MURCOTT, A (1999) "'The Nation's Diet'" and the policy contexts' in John Germov & Lauren Williams (eds)
The Social Appetite: An Introduction to the

Sociology of Food & Nutrition. Sydney: Oxford University Press.

MURCOTT, Anne (2011) 'Keeping the sociology in the sociology of food: strategies for harder times' Food Open Stream Plenary Address, BSA Annual Conference, LSE. 8 April.

MURCOTT, Anne and Campbell, Hugh (2004) 'Teoria agro-alimentare e sociologia dell'alimentazione' *Rassegna Italiana di Sociologia* XLV (4) 571-602.

MURPHY, E Parker, S and Phipps, C (1998) Food Choice for Babies in Murcott, A (ed) *The Nation's Diet*: the social science of food choice. Harlow, Essex: Longman.

ODDY, D and Miller, S (1976) *The Making of the Modern British Diet*. London: Croom Helm.

WARDE, Alan (1997) *Consumption, Food and Taste: culinary antinomies and commodity culture*. London: Sage.

YUDKIN, J and McKenzie, J (1964) *Changing Food Habits*. London: McGibbon and Kee.